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Arabs in U.S. fear witch hunt in Libya crisis

By Tom Masland
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Arab-Americans are fearful that the reports of a Libyan "hit squad" out to get President Reagan, like the "big Red scare" of the 1950s, could turn into a witch hunt — and that it could be directed against them.

From Los Angeles to Detroit to Washington, Arab-Americans last week were accusing the Reagan administration of cynically creating a climate of fear that could only increase the isolation felt by many immigrants and Americans of Middle Eastern descent.

They charged that the reports were intended to distract the nation from its domestic problems, stifle criticism of newly relaxed rules governing CIA investigations in this country or justify retaliation against Libya.

At the same time, several prominent Arab-American figures said they were puzzled that while the FBI reportedly was conducting a massive manhunt for the alleged terrorists, relatively few people they knew had been questioned.

"It's a big lie," said Mustafa Siam, a Palestinian native who heads the American Arab Civil Rights Committee in Los Angeles. The group routinely gathers reports of FBI questioning in that city's Arab community, estimated at 200,000. "It's a manhunt on radio and television, but we haven't seen anybody interviewed — in my opinion, because there's nobody to hunt."

"It's more of a conspiracy against Libya than the other way around," he said. "That's the feeling in the Arab community."

There are an estimated 2.5 million people of Arab heritage in the United States.

In Detroit, which has a large and outspoken Arab population, activist lawyer Abdeen Jabara charged that the city had been mentioned as a possible port of entry for the terrorists in order to "put Arab-Americans here on notice that they are being watched."

"People are fearful," he said. "This is a pretext for increasing harassment, increasing anti-Arab sentiment in this country.

"It's always good to have some kind of foreign bogyman to whip up unity in this country," he said. "But one of the curious things in all this is that we still don't know whether the CIA had targeted [Libyan leader Col. Moammar] Khadafy for elimination." There have been reports to that effect; the U.S. government denies it.

"I'm waiting for the witch-hunt hysteria to begin," said Ismael Ahmed, head of a community center in a neighborhood of Dearborn, Mich., a Detroit suburb whose main street is lined with Arab coffee houses and groceries. "I think these reports are going to cause real problems in this community. It strengthens the preconception that all Arabs are terrorists."

"All this is just intended to distract the people in this country," said Harvey Atiyeh of Allentown, a leader and Democratic political organizer in the city's Syrian community.

One of those questioned by the FBI recently, Fuad Mughrabi, a political science professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, said he was confused about why he had been selected, because he was last in Libya four years ago.

"There are others who have been to Libya a lot more often than I have who have not been questioned," he said.

The agent politely asked about Mughrabi's views on the possibility of a Libyan assassination attempt against Reagan, he said.

He said he told the agent that he considered the idea farfetched and that the agent volunteered that he, too, doubted it.

Mughrabi said that the visit did not greatly concern him but that "others in a more tenuous position than mine might be intimidated." Mughrabi, although born in Libya, is an American citizen.

Richard C. Shadyac, a Washington-based lawyer who said he represents about 4,000 Libyan students at American universities, said that the FBI had stepped up questioning of the students during recent months. But there has been no increase in such visits since the possibility was raised that Libyan-sponsored terrorists might be in this country, he said.

In any case, he said, the students have been instructed to refer all queries to his office and answer no questions.

"They feel intimidated by the FBI, and rightfully so," he said.

"They're always asking about terrorism in the U.S.," he said. He said of the latest reports "There's not one scintilla of solid evidence that would give substance to this orchestrated campaign of mass hysteria."

The FBI has made no official comment on the hit-squad reports or on how the agency is investigating them.

However, it was clear that official concern about them was real. For example, a notice posted at one border crossing in California late last week warned Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) employees that two such teams aiming to kill the President "may attempt to enter the U.S. illegally with the help of established smugglers familiar with the U.S.-Mexican border."

The notice contained names and descriptions of 12 men, all but two of them from Arab countries, as suspected members of the alleged assassination teams.

Arab-American organizations have long charged that the FBI and the INS have been used to stifle dissent by those opposed to this country's Mideast policies; now they fear a new round of questioning.

James J. Zogby, executive director of the ADC, said that some Arab-Americans are worrying that fear generated by the latest reports could provoke a backlash against them.

"This reminds me of the old Dick Tracy crime-stoppers — how you can tell a Soviet spy," he said. "First it was supposed to be five terrorists, and now it's 17, and it's sounding an awful lot like the old Joe McCarthy era, when he would say, 'I've got a list. . . .'"

Zogbe said that the fear of foreign assassins was being used to make relaxed rules for the CIA more palatable; an Arab issue, he said, was used because Arabs have the least-powerful ethnic constituency in this country.

"Arab-Americans are frightened," he said. "They see what the power of this kind of hysteria can be. One guy even mentioned the internment of Japanese-Americans of World War II."

The government, he said, should be required to reveal all the details of the alleged assassination plot.

"Show us what there is," he said. "They have created a hysteria, and we feel we're being set up."

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